

THE FOUNDATION OF ÆSTHETICS. ✓

IN what does Beauty consist? It is a question which cannot fail to interest us, for we are all conscious that in the Beautiful, both in nature and art, we have a manifestation of something more perfect and more true than what falls under our common experience. The function of the artist and the poet is not simply to affect our senses agreeably and raise in us the æsthetic thrill. They are men whose vision pierces deeper into the sphere of reality than does ours, who see the perfect through the veil of the imperfect, and the eternal through the temporal, and to whom it is given to reveal what they themselves have seen. Nor is it without justice that Mr. A. J. Balfour urges it as a fatal objection against the philosophy of naturalism that it provides us with no adequate explanation of our ideas of the Beautiful. We scarcely need any further argument to assure us of the falsity of a theory which tells us that the only reason why music delights us is that the crude sounds with which it first began were connected with certain pleasant occasions in the lives of our ape-like ancestors, and that a state of things is perfectly conceivable in which the cackling of a hen-yard should be more beautiful than the compositions of Beethoven. Even before we are able to give any direct reason for our belief, we are certain that the works of the great masters claim our admiration in virtue of an intrinsic excellence and because they approach to some ideal standard.

Nor is it only because it reveals to us glimpses of a more perfect order of things that we are naturally drawn to enquire into the true meaning of Beauty, but also because the art of any period is a sure index of the inmost character of the men of that age. The cathedrals of the fourteenth century speak to us of the faith of that epoch, the Renaissance style reveals to us no less clearly the neopaganism of a later day. We ourselves are leaving behind us the impress of our own minds in the style of the present time. Consequently as long as men love to scan the records of the past in order to trace the history of human character, so long will the nature of the Beautiful be a favorite subject of philosophic enquiry.

It will help us to discover what really constitutes Beauty if we ask ourselves what effect the contemplation of it has upon us. We could scarcely hesitate to reply that its natural effect is to excite our love. And our answer is in accord with the unanimous verdict of nearly all the world's greatest thinkers. We may perhaps be

allowed to quote two striking testimonies from antiquity. "Wisdom," Plato tells us in the *Phædrus*, "cannot be seen with the eyes; for her beauty would have filled us with unspeakable love had there been a visible image of her." So also, seven centuries later, S. Augustine writes: "Tell me, I pray, is it possible for us to love aught except what is beautiful?" But indeed it is hardly necessary for us to go back so far. Lines with which we are all familiar express the same truth:

"O happy living things! No tongue
Their beauty might declare.
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware."

To determine with accuracy the nature of this love which we feel towards the Beautiful is a point of paramount importance. For there are two kinds of love which spring from totally different sources, though in actual life the motives of our affection are often so mingled that it is impossible to say how much flows from one source and how much from the other. We can, perhaps, best explain our meaning by an example. Let us suppose two men each to have purchased a house in the midst of the lovely scenery of the Yorkshire dales, and each to be delighted with his purchase. One is a man whose pleasure lies solely in the scene before him. The other finds his satisfaction in the fact that his house is fitted up with all the most modern appliances for comfort, and that it is within easy reach of the city where his fortune was made and where his interests are still centred. Here we have instances both of the higher and the lower love. The latter has no regard whatever to the intrinsic perfection of its object, for its sole motive lies in the power which that object possesses of conferring some pleasure or advantage on the person who feels it. In the case I have supposed the retired merchant would not care in the least if the building of some hideous factory marred the whole beauty of his purchase; he might even feel pride in it as an index of the prosperity of his county. On the other hand, his neighbor's whole delight in the place would be destroyed; for its *raison d'être* lay in the perfection of the landscape and in that alone. Such was the love which the Ancient Mariner felt when he saw the fairy-like loveliness of the water-snakes; such in a very different degree is the enthusiasm we feel when we read of any of the heroic deeds which light up the pages of history.

It might perhaps seem as though we were wrong in dignifying the lower love by so exalted a name. Yet it is impossible to deny it a title to be called love merely because it is selfish. In both cases we find that strong attraction towards the object which is the essential characteristic of love. And even in the higher love

there is an element which if not selfish in the usual sense of that word, is at least self-regarding. Love must seek its own satisfaction, and even if its satisfaction lies not in any advantage to be gained, but simply in the contemplation of its object, it is impossible to exclude the self-regarding element altogether. Indeed, as we have already said, in life the higher and the lower love are generally found in combination; for instance, the love which a child feels for its parents and which makes every child believe that his own father is at once the wisest and the best man living is not solely motivated by reverence and admiration, but contains also a sense of favors to come. The same may be said of our religious feelings; although we may not be able to say in the concrete where one begins and the other ends, we can have no hesitation in affirming the existence of two elements in our love to God, which are as different as the oxygen and the hydrogen that unite to compose water.

Which of these two kinds of affection is it of which Plato and S. Augustine speak when they tell us that affection is the natural result of the sight of the beautiful? We reply at once that it is the higher and not the lower love of which they speak. No power of satisfying some desire and so conferring pleasure would be a ground for attributing beauty to any object. The sounds of the tom-tom possess no inherent loveliness because they stir the scantily-clad African to wild delight. To be beautiful an object does not need to be of any utility to us, but it must fulfil the conditions requisite to awake in us the higher love; in other words, it must possess its own proper perfection. And in this answer we have a clue to the true characteristic of beauty. It lies in the intrinsic perfection of the object.

Let me, however, guard myself against the ambiguity contained in this word "perfection." For evidently it can be used in more senses than one; and while we should all allow that a perfect horse was necessarily a thing of beauty, a perfect cab-horse can scarcely lay claim to the title. The reason is that in the first case perfection expresses the possession of the excellence which is proper to the nature of the horse; in the second case it merely means that the object spoken of has all that is needed to enable it to fulfil the external end to which we wish to put it. In this sense we apply the term to the commonest things. But when applied to beauty it of course has no reference to any external aim, and expresses only the possession in the fullest degree of the excellence which belongs to the nature of the object.

We may illustrate this by an appeal to experience. We all of us realize the beauty of the gayer butterflies which flutter from flower to flower in summer, of the "red admiral" or of the "clouded-

yellow;" but the common white butterfly fails to attract our attention. Why is this, except that whilst the former sorts strike us as being perfect in their kind, the latter seems to us as but an ordinary type? But we have only got to note the white butterfly more carefully to observe how soft is the down upon its wings, how delicate its shading, to recognize that it, too, is wonderfully perfect, and in consequence wonderfully beautiful.

There is, however, a feature in the love with which the sight of the beautiful inspires us which must not be overlooked. It is not that which consists in the aspiration after something which we do not possess. It is the love of fruition or union; it is what we commonly term joy or delight. These two phases of love—*aspiration* and *fruition*—may be paralleled by the power of the magnet to attract steel: it not only draws the steel towards it, but holds it united to it. The objects of our love exercise a similar influence. They first draw us towards them, and since their attractive power is in no way exhausted by this, they bind us in a close union to them. In the case of the beautiful we enjoy this union from the first; the delight of fruition enters at once into the soul. The means by which we enjoy it is, as experience tells us, contemplation, and the more profoundly our contemplation penetrates and realizes the perfections of the object, the deeper grows our love and our delight. Any one who enters the Turner collection in the National Gallery at London is conscious of the beauty of that master's works; but only the trained artist realizes what a treasury of perfections each picture is.

The conclusion at which we have arrived, that beauty consists in the intrinsic perfection of the object, allows us to decide another point of no little moment. It is that beauty is perceived by the mind, and the mind alone. By this I do not mean to say that the senses take no part in the perception of the beautiful. To maintain this would, of course, be absurd, and we shall shortly see what is the part which they play. My contention is simply that the knowledge of beauty as such is outside their sphere. For it is only the intellect which can understand what perfections are proper to any object. It is the intellect which considers any class and sees which things fall below the type of that class and which realize the perfections of the type in their fullness. The senses could not see in the Gothic arch the lightness and the spring—if we may use the word—which constitute a large part of its superiority over the Norman. There is nothing in a line engraving which is calculated to give special pleasure to the sense. Yet common consent allows to line engraving a high place among the arts.

The senses can tell us nothing of the perfection of an object, for they speak to us only of what is pleasant to them themselves. The eye delights in light; the ear in sweet sounds. But this pleasure is purely subjective. The sense of sight cannot tell us whether the bright color which gratifies it is a perfection or not in the object viewed. So we find that children will always like the bright color for its own sake. It is not till the powers of reflection have developed that we can judge whether or not the color is appropriate, whether in fact it is "in good taste." There is a passage in Burke's *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful* which bears on this subject and which I quote all the more willingly because his view of the nature of Beauty differs so widely from that maintained here. He says: "Wherever disposition, where decorum, where congruity are concerned I am convinced that (in taste) the understanding operates, and nothing else, and its operation is in reality far from being always sudden, or when it is sudden it is often far from being right."

So little indeed has sense to do with the perception of Beauty that there are only two of our senses—those of sight and hearing—the objects of which are capable of being termed beautiful. It is only by a conscious misapplication of terms that we can say that a thing tastes beautiful or smells beautiful. And the reason that this prerogative falls to the lot of the senses of sight and hearing is that these two minister in an especial manner to the mind, while the others are more purely physical in their use. This argument from our current modes of speech, though at first sight it may seem trivial, is in reality of no little weight. Long before men have begun to discuss problems of philosophy, the language which they use forms a philosophy for them. It testifies to the way in which, by the very nature of things, they view the world around them, and is a true witness because the laws of the intellect are the handiwork of God. If beauty had been something of which the sense takes cognizance, why should it be found impossible in any language to apply the word to the objects of taste, touch and smell? If it is not the object of the reasoning intellect, why do we call not only what we hear and see, but also a heroic deed or a self-sacrificing life beautiful?

The same conclusion is strengthened if we approach our subject from a different point of view and consider what are the special characteristics which render any object beautiful. The scholastic philosophers tell us that there are three requisites—proportion, integrity or the absence of all curtailment, and resplendence—*Proportio, Integritas, Claritas*. I am not concerned to show that no other assignment of its essential constitutives could have been

made, but mention their opinion, since I believe that on reflection it will be recognized that these do in the main sum up what is required to confer the charm of beauty on an object. For the moment we may defer the consideration of resplendence, as it will best be treated of when we come to speak of the manner in which the senses aid us in æsthetic perception. But the part played by proportion and integrity is plain enough. It is proportion which gives us in a picture the harmony of color, the due relation of the various parts to each other and the subordination of them all to one end; in poetry it gives us metre and rhyme; and how entirely music depends on it is testified by the appropriation of the word harmony to that art. It is the absence of proportion which would displease us if we were to see a Hebrew prophet represented with the features of an Apollo. However beautiful the sculptured face might be in itself, we should feel that there was a lack of harmony between the character to be represented and the representation given us by the artist. With regard to integrity, it is evident at once that the least curtailment of any part impairs the beauty of the work of art. How much charm is lost to the Laocoön by the diminutive figures of the two sons! How many masterpieces of Greek sculpture, the perfection of whose lines cannot be equaled at the present day, have by some insignificant mutilation lost nearly all their attractiveness except to the practised eye of the artist whose imagination is able to restore what they have lost! If a bust does not fall under the condemnation of this canon it is solely because the human head possesses a certain completeness in itself so that we are not conscious of any deficiency in representation. But it is not owing to mere fashion that we enjoy the sight of a fine bust, while we should turn with dislike from a figure which represented half the human form.

Now, both these characteristics can be perceived by the mind and by the mind alone. The mere sense could never experience any repugnance to an incomplete figure or to a statue that was unduly diminutive, nor could sight, apart from reflection, tell us aught of the harmony of the colors in a sunset, or appreciate the manner in which Vandyke's portraits appeal to us like the characters in a great drama.

What then is the part which we are to assign to the senses in the perception of beauty? The question is easily answered if we remember that however great be the intrinsic perfection of an object, there is one condition which must be satisfied if it is to appear beautiful to us. We must know it not in a vague or abstract manner; but it must either have fallen under our own personal experience or be known to us in so clear and definite a way that we can represent it sensibly to our imagination as though it were

present to us. Without this it can have no more attractiveness for us than one of those chefs d'œuvre which are the glory of some foreign cathedrals, but which except on a few great festivals are covered with a curtain. Indeed even if we see the object, and there yet remain some impediment which hinders us from fully appreciating its qualities, the love which it excites in us is diminished in a like degree. Thus a slight obscurity of expression is sufficient to prevent many a noble passage of poetry from obtaining its due meed of admiration, and a defective ear may render us totally unappreciative of music.

Here then we find in what our dependence on the senses consists. For it is a law that all knowledge comes to us primarily through the senses; abstract ideas are only attained by analogies and comparisons, or in other words by the aid which the senses and the imagination can afford us. But to admit that this is the only road to human knowledge is tantamount to saying that it is the only road to human love. And this truth, as it seems almost unnecessary to point out, is most wonderfully illustrated in the Incarnation. This was the great appeal to the love of man, the supreme effort on the part of God to awake in all hearts the dormant fires of affection. And the means used were proportioned to the aim. He manifested Himself in a sensible form, and it is by His beauty as thus made known that He draws all hearts to Himself.

The need of this sensible manifestation is expressed by the third element mentioned above, resplendence. An object can only be called resplendent when its perfections are such as to compel attention, when they force themselves upon our notice, when they are clear to us with a clearness which our eyes can see and which seems in itself to confer a halo of beauty. It is this quality of resplendence that all are conscious of in such a picture as the Madonna di San Sisto. But in no other way than by an appeal to our senses or our imagination can the perfection of any object thus impress us.

There may, of course, be other kinds of beauty which do not need to appear in a sensible form. We may go further and affirm that there are such kinds of beauty. We ourselves recognize it when we talk of a beautiful life or of a beautiful character; for thereby we give an unconscious testimony that beauty is to be found in man's moral and spiritual nature, in that part of him in which the senses have no share. It is this spiritual beauty which belongs to the angels and to God. In this life we cannot perceive it, for we can only recognize the beautiful in its material veil; but we hope for the day when the veil will be no longer needed, and

we shall be able to gaze not merely on the shadow, but on the unclouded reality of beauty.

There is, however, a reflection which naturally suggests itself with regard to the comparatively small part played by the senses, and which might seem fatal to this view. It is that there are certain colors in nature, as, for instance, the blue of a southern sky, which are beautiful in themselves and to which it would be as unnatural to refuse the name as it would be to apply it to the objects of the senses of taste and smell. Yet it is hard to say that there is any intrinsic perfection in them apart from the pleasurable impression which they convey to the senses, or that proportion and integrity have any place in them. This is, of course, true. There are certain colors and certain sounds which may without exaggeration be called not merely pleasant but beautiful. Nor is the reason far to seek. There are certain objects between which and the sense which perceives them there is a natural harmony. Light in this way confers a pleasure on the eyes which dark and sombre colors cannot do. But it is only when the mind consciously or semi-consciously reflects on the admirable harmony which is found between the sense and its object that we conceive of light not simply as agreeable, but as beautiful. So even here we may claim that the principle that beauty can be only intellectually known is not violated, but on the contrary confirmed.

How, then, shall we define beauty? It is a bold thing to attempt to do when definitions have already been given by so many great authorities. But as we have stated clearly what we hold to be its most essential elements, to give a definition will not be doing more than what has already been ventured. It is clear that any definition framed must be understood to have reference to æsthetic beauty alone as distinguished from moral, since the beauty of man's spiritual actions can in this life be only dimly realized through the help of sensible analogies, and is in fact seen "through a glass, darkly." The two chief characteristics which we seem to have distinguished in it are the perfection of the object and its manifestation to us in an especially clear and evident manner. Our definition may, therefore, run thus—the luminous manifestation to the senses or the imagination of the intrinsic perfections of an object.

There is still one problem which we have hitherto left unsolved, namely, the reason for the love which we feel towards the Beautiful. Why should the mere contemplation of a fair landscape fill our hearts with delight? What cause is there that our nature should react to this stimulus? And, more noteworthy still, why should

our own characters be enabled by our power to appreciate the higher forms of beauty?

The answer to this question is to be sought in the nature of the human will. The will is always attracted by what appears to the mind to be good. This is a law as universal as the law of gravitation. It is the spring of all our action, good and bad men alike acting because their will adheres to what seems good. The difference between the two classes lies in this, that while the good aim at what is truly the best, the bad, fixing their attention on something lower, cherish the idea of it until it influences them. We may see something similar in art. We perhaps prefer a badly executed sketch by some one whom we love to a far more beautiful one by a stranger. It is not that we are incapable of appreciating their respective merits, but that we have diverted our attention from the intrinsic excellence of the picture to a relative goodness which it possesses for us. Where, however, there is nothing of this kind to influence our judgment, our will acts spontaneously; it feels the attractive force of any perfection which is sufficiently apparent and adheres to it; in other words, the ultimate reason of our love for the Beautiful is to be sought in our natural tendency to what is good. If there was question of something which we saw to be good, but the enjoyment of which depended on any action on our part, the will would set our faculties in motion to attain our end. But here the enjoyment of the good lies purely in the act of contemplation, and the only task before us is to contemplate the beauty before us and fathom its perfections as far as we are able. In the contemplation itself we find satisfaction and delight.

Fr. Jungmann, late professor at the University of Innsbrück, in his important work, "*Æsthetik*," puts forward a theory which while similar in many respects to the view which we have maintained, differs from it in certain particulars. A brief account of this theory may be of interest, for it draws attention to a special aspect of natural beauty which has at all times appealed forcibly to all whose temperament has anything of poetry in it. Fr. Jungmann, indeed, insists strongly that our love for beauty is due to our natural desire for perfection; but he considers that in this case the operative force is the attraction which that which constitutes our own perfection naturally exerts upon us. We look, he says, on the face of nature and there behold perfections which we recognize as similar to those which we may see realized in our own souls. What we admire in the surge as it dashes against the rocks is its vigor; the colors of the sunset delight us with their harmony; the landscape with its variety and ordered peace; the cliffs by their unchangeable stability. We cannot fail to love those things which seem as if

were to be allied to us and to mirror the secrets of our hearts; and even without formulating to ourselves why we thus delight in the contemplation of beauty, we find satisfaction in it and love it.

It certainly seems at first sight that the resemblance which we thus trace is a poet's fancy. But our author assures us that there is a far more intimate connection between nature and ourselves than that which is made by the work of the imagination; it is no mere play of fancy that we see a resemblance to ourselves in the lower forms of creation, for they are truly allied to us. Man is in a special way the image of God; but all other created beings are the work of the same hand, and throughout creation, though there is infinite variety, there is no contradiction, and the whole cosmic order is one great manifestation of the Divine character. In this unity of creation as declaring its author, Fr. Jungmann finds the justification of his theory. It is in response to a law of our inmost being that man is attracted to what is in fact the Divine image stamped upon the external world.

What we have already said will have shown that we cannot accept this view altogether. Our love, as we believe, is motivated solely by the perfection of the object considered in itself. Nor do we think that it is in any way essential that there should be any similarity between the perfections which we admire in it and such as we seek to realize in ourselves. But there can be no doubt that we do find a special delight in tracing resemblances between the spiritual and the material world, and though these similes be the work of the imagination, yet we are conscious of something deeper than the mere play of the fancy; they often possess the power to give us a new insight into some spiritual truth, to raise for a moment the veil which hides from our sight the unseen world.

We may perhaps be allowed to quote as an illustration of this the last three verses from Mr. Warren's "Lines written at Minthead:"

"One lesson still my spirit learned
From flood and daylight fleeting past,
And from its own strange self that yearned
Like them to lapse into the vast,
And merge and end its vague unrest
In some wide ocean of the West ;
"Ere we can find true peace again,
Our being must have second birth,
Purged and made one through toil and pain
With Him who rules and rounds the earth,
Beyond the dark behind the light
In mystery of the Infinite ;
"And we like rivers from their source,
Through cloud and shine, by deep and shoal,
Must follow that which draws our course
The Love that is its guide and goal :
Of life of death ye made me free
Waters and hills of Severn Sea."

It is true that the poet has here invested a scene rich already in its own perfections with a new loveliness in making it symbolic of the course of the soul towards God. But he has, it seems to us, won a greater success than this; for he has shown us a glimpse of a beauty of a far higher order, the beauty of that spiritual world which, since the senses are unable to perceive it, cannot appeal to us unless through the imagery of the poet.

Naturally, we do not realize the beauty of the relation of the soul to God. But in those verses, which take us to the shores of the Severn and bid us watch the waters rolling on to the great deep, we discover what its loveliness is.

Here, then, as we believe, we have the explanation of the fact, which seems to have exercised so great an influence on Fr. Jungmann, that we are always striving to express natural beauty in terms of our spiritual experience, and to represent our inner life by symbolism drawn from nature. We are conscious within ourselves of an order of beauty other than that which lies without us, but we are unable to realize it or to imagine its true character. We are thus driven to embody it in an external symbolism, through which it may appeal to us, however inadequately. Indeed, this need under which we lie of interpreting our mental states by the aid of visible phenomena is true not only of the beautiful, but of the terrible as well. Thus in *King Lear* Shakespeare uses the battle of the elements to bring before us the terrific nature of the tempest in the king's mind. And on the other hand the world without, glorious as it is, lacks something: if we really believed that it was nothing but matter, the product of a merely mechanical evolution, it could not seem to us to be really perfect, for thought and mind would be lacking to it; it would be unable to move our love. We therefore bring the external world into close connection with our spiritual life, and looking on it through a medium which as it were transfigures it, find in it a charm and a beauty which would otherwise be wanting.

Yet while we do not hold that we perceive beauty because the same perfection which we delight in is found in our own nature, we are in full accord with Fr. Jungmann when he tells us that the material world is a revelation of the beauty of God. Many an incident in the lives of the saints shows us how at all times the holiest souls have delighted to find new manifestations of God's perfections in the wealth of beauty which He has scattered round us. It was this thought which inspired the well-known lines of S. Francis d'Assisi and caused S. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi to shed tears of joy at the sight of a flower.

The soul was created to seek God, and it is for this reason that

it is ever seeking the good, for it recognizes some reflection of His perfection in all that is good and is attracted towards it. Beauty is but one manner in which He who is infinitely perfect shows Himself to us, and though our mind may be fully occupied by the intrinsic perfection of the object, and may not find its way from the creature to the Creator, yet if its beauty were not derived from Him it would possess nothing for us to admire. Once viewed in this light, the material world no longer lacks the spiritual element of beauty, nor depends on our imagination for its possession, for even in its humblest forms it reveals to us the thought of God. Thus, too, we are able to justify that instinctive feeling common to all men, that the perception of beauty elevates and ennoble the soul. No sensualist account of the origin of our ideas of beauty could explain this; with such an origin beauty might perhaps please us, but it could do nothing to ennoble. But that its tendency really does exercise a purifying and ennobling effect on us is the unanimous testimony of the wise from the days of Plato to those of Wordsworth. The contemplation of what is fair, of "whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely" moulds us and influences us for good, as surely as the sordid surroundings of life in many of our great cities tend to deaden the imagination and to stunt the soul.

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THE CELTIC GROUNDWORK OF "THE INFERNO" AND DANTE'S PROTOTYPE.

IT is well known to students of the "Divina Commedia" that the poem did not spring from the brain of its author like Minerva from that of Jove, full-panoplied and full-grown. Mediæval literature is full of the rough-hewn materials which the Tuscan poet's genius, like a divinity in its action, shaped into an everlasting monument of thought. The genesis of the "Commedia" was somewhat akin to the formation of our own planetary system, according to the nebular hypothesis—a mere film of matter whirling wildly in space, gathering other particles and taking shape as it went, and at last emerging from chaos a magnificent and beautiful organism. Many